

Why Matter Matters

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1. Work of Aura

How do you picture your funeral? If you think you'll opt for a civil ceremony, then you know there will be relatively improvised speeches and applause: the impromptu is likely to prevail. There will be no structuring ritual, no formal apparatus to make the pain bearable. And yet the same might happen in a religious ceremony, if it were to mimic the civil rite and acquire its uncertainties and difficulties: imagine it took place in an ugly church with poor ornaments, and the speeches did not make use of a high register but of everyday language. The experiment of the funeral is somewhat extreme but, in the end, appropriate (as it affects everyone) to address the difficulties of sacred art – currently confused with profane art, which is not in its golden age either.

Why is it so? Camille Paglia, in *Glittering Images: A Journey Through Art from Egypt to Star Wars*,¹ speaks of a crisis of the spirit. Gone are the days of the cathedrals, and religion is no longer the subject of art. According to the author, this is manifested at a mac-

roscopic level in the oblivion of the canon (people don't understand an annunciation or a flight into Egypt because they do not know what they are). I would add that the main client of art has changed, as it is no longer the Church but the government: artists now have to simulate social interests just as they had to simulate religious interests in the past. And the public does no longer go see art in the church, but at exhibitions, pushed by the media and advertisements. As a result, the only occasions in which there is talk of sacred art is when it comes to provocations, such as *Piss Christ* by Serrano, Kippenberger's crucified frog, or Cattelan's John Paul II crushed by a meteorite.

To counter this trend, the Catholic Church is now seeking to recover a relationship with art that would not be subordinated or mimetic, by designing a Vatican pavilion at the Venice Biennale or involving contemporary artists in ancient churches (think of the altar by Parmeggiani in the cathedral of Reggio Emilia, Kounellis' bishop's chair or the candlestick by Spalletti). The results are not obvious, because the difficulties of sacred art are only the strongest symptom of the difficulties of art in general – as authoritative and even conservative commentators have recently pointed out, see Marc Fumaroli,² Jean Clair³ and Roger Scruton.⁴ Art, in fact, seems to be realizing Nietzsche's prophecy about humanity after Copernicus:

² Claire 2011.

³ Fumaroli 2009.

⁴ Scruton 2009.

¹ Paglia 2012.

it is “rolling off toward the x”, without an end and without an orientation.

Now, it is easy to see that many sectors of contemporary art are in crisis. It is even easier to see that the “return to religion” talked about for the past twenty years has largely been a false alarm: it has not lead to any real change of customs or beliefs, which remain secular in all respects. However, I find it too easy and simplistic to establish (as Paglia does) a direct relationship between a spiritual crisis and an aesthetic crisis. There surely is a relationship between the two but, if anything, it is the reverse of what the author posits: the hyper-spiritualization of art, become conceptual, is what has caused the aesthetic crisis. This phenomenon was described very well by Hegel: while ancient classical art develops an “aesthetic religion” characterized by a strict correspondence between form and content, in modern romantic art content (the spirit, the concept) prevails over form. Christ on the cross is not nice to look at, what matters is the spiritual significance of the scene: here, in this extreme conceptualism, we have the most powerful antecedent of Duchamp.

All romantic art – as well as its heirs, the avant-garde, which not coincidentally mainly took place in the Christian world (to my knowledge there are no Islamic, Jewish, Confucian, Taoist, or Hindu avant-gardes) – develops this hyper-spiritual vocation. The claim made by contemporary visual art that beauty is not at its centre⁵ is a statement

of hyper-conceptuality. It is not true, as is always repeated following Benjamin, that in the age of mechanical reproduction art has lost the aura resulting from uniqueness. What has happened is exactly the opposite, the artwork is now essentially a work of aura, the result of a fully spiritual consecration by which any object is transformed into artwork, museums are transformed into temples, visitors turn into pilgrims and penitents, and art dealers become merchants of aura.⁶

Assuming that, if exposed in a favourable location and with the appropriate ritual, anything can become a work of art, means placing transubstantiation within artistic production: the artist consecrates any object, transforming it into an artwork, through reading a devotional text written by an art-critic. So it is true that there is no more sacred art (with sacred subjects) and that we no longer know how to build beautiful churches. But in new and often beautiful cathedrals – museums – we are engaging in a perpetual adoration. If this is the case, then, art is not dead, but more alive than ever, and indeed it has taken the place of religion.

One can always object to this interpretation that “conceptual” is not equivalent to “spiritual,” that the spirit may be mystery and revelation, while the concept is transparency, clarity, and often a futile game. It might also be objected that the aura of conceptual works is an aura of plastic. Sure, but the problem is that in order to restore the

⁵ Benjamin 1968.

⁶ Dal Lago – Giordano 2006.

myth – perhaps to create a “new mythology” as the romantics dreamed two centuries ago – the will to do so isn’t enough. After all, the whole story is already written in *War and Peace*: at the eve of the battle of Borodino, Napoleon, the bourgeois and Enlightened emperor, contemplates the picture of his son, the King of Rome. His opponent, Kutusov, kneels in front of the icons. The outcome of the battle is uncertain, while that of the war will be disastrous for Napoleon. But in the long run, in the two centuries that separate us from Borodino, Napoleon’s principles have had the upper hand. We are now more able to see the limits of those principles, in art, economy and politics, as well as in our own lives. But we are also aware (or at least this is my steadfast belief) that spirituality and the divine are bound to a power we have to acknowledge, but with which we can not reconcile if not in an illusory form, sacrificing the values, merits and pains of modernity.

2. Contractual Art

It is important to define the meaning of “concept” in the phrase “conceptual art.” In what sense is Duchamp’s bottle rack more conceptual than the School of Athens by Raphael, who manages to embody in the single gesture of Aristotle’s half-raised hand the *via media* character of ethical virtues? In hindsight, the notion of conceptual art is a legal concept: if we take

the couple “law and art”,⁷ we will notice that the former is not extrinsic to the latter (unlike what would happen if, say, we tried to explain artworks through their authors’ pathologies according to the couple “psychiatry and art.”)

For the past century conceptual art has, in fact, been contractual: it deals with the economic data (the world of art is above all the art market) and seeks to broaden the definition of art, renegotiating the implicit contract between buyer, author and user to the point of essentially becoming a contract itself. In fact, the only concept used by conceptual-contractual art is, after all, the law of art, the canonical idea that an artwork is a physical thing, made by an author and endowed with an attractive appearance. Therefore, it is necessary to contradict the canons, move around them, expand them, remove them, and all this, rather perversely, happens through a tool that is traditionally associated with the canon and legality: the contract.

The powers of the contract are great, as it has a performative dimension and allows one to do things with words, as suggested by the English philosopher John L. Austin,⁸ the theoretician of speech acts, who noted that the words “I do” at a wedding do not merely describe a ceremony, but produce two new social objects, a husband and a wife. The same thing systematically happens with documents, which allow one to certify, document, archive, name, and so forth ac-

⁷ See Donati 2012, Ajani-Donati (eds), 2011.

⁸ Austin 1962.

ording to a dual mode which I believe can be traced back to the following: “weak document” (record of a fact) and “strong document” (inscription of an act). To be clear, all the artists that record performances otherwise destined to disappear produce weak documents. The same happens when artists – such as Gordon Matta-Clark, who makes collages with legal papers – take advantage of the aesthetic appeal of paperwork and the magic power of archive.

But documents can be used in a stronger form, that is, to literally produce acts: Theodore Fu Wan contractually changes his name to Saskatche Wan, Alix Lambert gets married with five different wives in six months, Maria Eichhorn conceives of her own artistic activity as the drafting of contracts in order to protect urban areas threatened by speculation. The conferring power of the document is at the heart of practices such as those by Stefan Bruggemann and Robert Barry, who have two of their works assigned by contract every five years to one or the other. Similarly, exploiting the laws of copyright, Philippe Parreno and Peter Huyge acquire the rights to use a Manga figure. The contract can go up to the staging of a subversion of the rules that are no longer those of art, but of the Criminal Code, such as when the artist gives the order to rob a grocery store, or, as in “Corruption Contract” by the group Superflex, the buyer – in obvious derogation from the standard theory of beauty as a symbol of moral goodness – is committed to extort or bribe.

One can also create artworks by a mere contractual *fiat*. In 1959 Yves Klein made

“Empty Artist,” an exhibition without works, in which the user was issued a contract for the sale of a “zone of immaterial pictorial sensibility”. Much later, in 2010, Etienne Chabaud made a work that consists only of contracts, certificates and statements of authenticity. Similarly, the contract can turn the author into an artwork, as in the arrangement by which Jill Magid gives a specialized company a mandate to transform its charred remains into a diamond. But the extreme case is perhaps that of Robert Morris’ 1963 contract, which consists of two parts: on the left, an iron plate with a few lines engraved on it, on the right a statement in which the artist withdraws the artwork status from the artwork itself, transferring the artistic aura onto the document.

Immanuel Kant said that the character of art consists in making people think. But what thoughts are aroused by these works? Questions of an essentially legal nature. For example: who is the author, if she merely gives instructions for others to make the work? She can be intimidating if, as Seth Siegelaub did, she prescribes in the contract that even the slightest change involves an irreversible alteration of the artwork. She can even be despotic, in a perverse way: this is the case of Daniel Buren who rigorously avoids signing or authenticating his works. And again, can we say that the curator of an exhibition or a museum is an author, when his responsibility goes far beyond the management of the exhibition space? (For instance, an artist like Cattelan has co-curated the Berlin Biennial in 2006 with Massimiliano Gioni).

And is the performance really an immaterial artwork that escapes the market? It was so according to the original ideology, but now the world is full of recordings of performances. Indeed, the world is full of documents, as in the philosophical conversations with Ian Wilson, of which only a piece of paper with a signature is left. There are even “scripta”, works that can be assembled and unassembled following instructions for use. Or works that only consist in documents, such as the sheet of the complaint lodged by Cattelan at the police headquarters in Forlì, reporting the theft of an invisible work of art from his car.

However, contemporary art simply brings to the fore a character proper of the artworks of all time and type. A documental aspect has always defined the horizon of art, as it has to do with the establishment of social objects in general. So, like any other social object, the artwork is defined by a law which I have tried to formalize in the terms of Object = Inscribed Act. That is to say that social objects are the result of social acts (such as to involve at least two people) characterized by the fact of being recorded, on a piece of paper, a computer file, or even only in people’s minds. Therefore, the dimension of the contract is not a break with the essence of traditional art, which as such postulates the cooperation between author and user suggested over thirty years ago by Umberto Eco in *Lector in fabula*.⁹ The full realization of expectations, even in traditional

art, often led to a factor of surprise, a slight transgression of the rule, so as to give a breath of authorship and novelty to the arts that (unlike heavily coded traditions) call for such things.

The contemporary variant is precisely the thrill of the contract, in which the artist feels the more revolutionary the more he develops the sophistication of a shyster. Here transgression and the surprise element become the most important features of the work, and the bureaucratic frisson takes the place of other elements (information, emotion, aesthetic satisfaction) that were constitutive of traditional artworks. The romantic dream of turning the world into a work of art was realized in the paperwork, where art really comes down to life. The bartender that does not give you the receipt is potentially an absolute performer, and the event would be even more sublime and complete if it is accompanied by a report to the financial police.

We all await the time when a condominium assembly will become a work of art, whose vestige, the minutes, will be hung on the wall as a decoration. In contractual art, an old cartoon by Giuseppe Novello comes true. The cartoon depicts a young man whose noble and cultured family wanted him to be a composer, but who at night – under the frowning eyes of Beethoven’s bust – gave vent to his true Muse: accounting. Nothing wrong with that. After all, Jeff Koons worked in the stock market. Perfection would be reached if Cattelan received a chair of commercial law drawing on the ex-

⁹ Eco 1979.

pertise accumulated in his years of artistic militancy.

3. From the Vittoriano to the Urinal

And beauty? It is no longer a problem, of course, provided that it has ever been one. Since 1993, in Boston, there has been a MOBA, a Museum of Bad Art which organises exhibitions and conferences developing an idea that is simple but efficacious: take some bad paintings and call them by their real name. This doesn't always work, some pieces are not that bad after all, and overall one gets the impression that the percentage of bad art is not significantly greater than that present in many museums of fine arts, both ancient and modern. What matters, though, is that MOBA ironizes about what for a century now has been the fundamental aesthetic creed of avant-gardes, which I would call "dogma of aesthetic indifference". That is, the thesis according to which beauty is no longer the primary objective of what used to be called "fine arts" to distinguish them from useful arts.

This aesthetic (or more exactly anaesthetic) creed comes from afar and goes back at least to Romanticism, characterised by Hegel (who didn't really like the Romantics) as a prevalence of content over form, as a prearranged and strongly wanted disharmony. It is not by chance that in 1853 a Hegelian, Rosenkranz, wrote *Aesthetics of*

the Ugliness,¹⁰ grasping the spirit of the age: beauty is not needed, aura is enough, although this took place in the epoch of daguerreotype – that is, of that technical reproducibility which, according to Benjamin, endorses the end of artistic aura. This is a precocious and evident proof, I believe, of the thesis I am trying to defend, namely that the disappearance of beauty and the imposition of aura are two concomitant phenomena.

Nonetheless, like in any religion, the dogma of aesthetic indifference has many more followers in theory than in practice. When writing an essay on aesthetics, one is always ready to affirm that what one is dealing with is a conceptual experience in which beauty is a fossil out of place. One is not as ready, though, to affirm the same when buying a table or an armchair, a carpet or a dress: then the requirement of aesthetic pleasantness stays unchanged. It is not hard to recognise a contradiction here (or, to stick to religious jargon, a double truth), so that we have an age, ours, that carefully cultivates the myth of beauty and yet easily accepts that what used to be called "fine arts" no longer have beauty as their primary objective.

Thus we have, on the one hand, the most beautiful women and men in history, the best-finished objects, the most-selected food, incomparably better wines than all the wines mankind has ever drunk – and works of art that are ugly, on purpose so, or unkempt, or

¹⁰ Rosenkranz 1853.

meaningless, or at least an art that thinks it can be ugly because it sees itself as intelligent. And since looks (and taste) still matter, the consolation for visitors is offered by galleries, which are beautiful (we shall come back to this later, as it's not a detail). Or perhaps the gratification lies in the free white wine and cheese you are offered at inaugurations (unlike the cinema, where you're the one to pay for wine and cheese, if you want them, since supposedly the aesthetic gratification comes from the show). Now, there are people convinced that between what you see in a gallery and what you put into your own house there is an abyss. I (and I doubt I am the only one) believe it is not so, also because many works are destined to enter people's houses, just like many other handiworks. In the following pages I will therefore try to fight the correlated dogmas of aesthetic indifference and auratic omnipotence attempting an answer to the question: what can be done to avoid that any MOMA or MOCA or MACBA or MADRE or MAMBO becomes indistinguishable from a MOBA?

Despite the appearances, the MOBA belongs to an ancient tradition, as its predecessors can already be found in the situation described by Carlo Dossi when commenting on the sketches for the Vittoriano in *I mattoidi: al primo concorso pel monumento in Roma a Vittorio Emanuele II* (literally, *The nutcases: for the first competition for the Victor Emmanuel II monument in Rome*)¹¹: "Ècommi

¹¹ Dossi 1884.

a voi, pòveri bozzetti fuggiti od avviati al manicomio, dinanzi ai quali chi prende la vita sul tràgico passa facendo atti di sdegno e chi la prende, come si deve, a gioco, si abbandona a momenti di clamorosa ilarità".¹² This was in 1884, that is, in an age of bad taste and eclecticism possibly produced by the vast photographic material at disposal (it is on this side, rather than that of the loss of aura, that we should measure the impact of technical reproducibility on art). Beauty was still being searched-for, but it wasn't found, and the outcome was the very white, marble writing machine that we can still see in Piazza Venezia in Rome – which is not so bad, after all, if we compare it with other rejected sketches that Dossi laughed about.

Also, it is not so bad when compared with many works of art that fill galleries and museums, and that appeal to what I propose we call Great Conceptual Art: the art that has cultivated the dogmas of aesthetic indifference and auratic omnipotence. If the works of the "nutcases" were often ugly but not on purpose, those of the Great Conceptual Art are just as ugly, but purposely so. One would be tempted to see in this an extra responsibility but instead, with a somehow miraculous proceeding (as it has to do with transfiguration) it is not so. While laughing at the Vittoriano, scorning its ugliness and pitying its author are all accepted attitudes, if

¹² "Here I am, you poor sketches escaped from – or made in – the madhouse, before whom those who take life tragically pass showing disdain, and those who take it (as they should) as a game abandon themselves to moments of clamorous hilarity".

one risked doing the same with Great Conceptual Art one would be in trouble, accused of nostalgia, incompetence, bad taste and aesthetic insensibility (and it's bizarre, given that this art does not aspire to beauty). Beauty is no longer art's business and if you didn't get that you're an ignoramus.

If you think about it, this doctrine it is bizarre because it would be like saying that health is not medicine's priority. Given that Great Conceptual Art comes not long after the Vittoriano, someone could malevolently think that the dogma of aesthetic indifference is a late version of the fable of the fox and the grapes. Yet the intimidated audience accepts and endures. They go to exhibitions, applaud and buy if they can, proving to be much less self-confident than the nineteenth century bourgeoisie, that would perhaps scorn Impressionism, but at least, in doing so, showed that it had its own taste. Great Conceptual Art users can, at most, say to themselves: "I could have made this". But they are wrong: the endeavour is far beyond their reach, it is very, and romantically, monumental. In the age when nutcases were competing for the Vittoriano, Nietzsche wrote *Beyond Good and Evil* proposing a transvaluation of all values. An undoubtedly vast project, that nonetheless was realised in art. When the last unprepared visitors – those ready to shout "Ugly! Ugly!", in the right or the wrong, in front of ugly or beautiful works – were gone, a spell was cast so that their very sons or grandchildren say "Beautiful! Beautiful!" before works that have only one declared feature, namely that of not aspiring to beauty.

The Zarathustra of this transvaluation was obviously Duchamp, thirty years after the nutcases of the Vittoriano. But Duchamp's genius did not consist, as is sometimes believed, of his breaking with the past. Rather, in the opposite way, it consisted of his art's ultimate continuity with it. His urinal, as well as the Mona Lisa with moustaches, draws together the threads of the aesthetic frustrations accumulated by generations of eclecticism and pompierism, together with a forced and semi-religious cult of Great Non Conceptual Art. Are you tired of showing an aesthetic devotion that doesn't belong to you before the Mona Lisa? Don't worry, draw some moustaches on her and you shall be saved by the intervention of Great Conceptual Art. Are you fed up with works that struggle to be beautiful and are just vulgar or ordinary? Again, don't worry: take a urinal, or a bottle rack (curious tool, by the way) or a bicycle wheel, exhibit it in a pertinent environment (a gallery or a museum), give it a title and sign it: you'll have realised the marvellous conceptual transubstantiation thanks to which a common object becomes a work of aura. From this point of view, applying the dogma of aesthetic indifference and auraticity at all costs is crucial, so as to avoid some incompetent thinking that the miracle depends on the action of aesthetic properties instead of the conceptual invention. Here's the first difference from the Vittoriano, a monument that loved beauty, despite not being loved back.

There is a second difference. Dossi could easily laugh at the Vittoriano, whereas with

Duchamp's urinal one needs to be very serious and thoughtful, admiring and concentrated. Otherwise one risks ending up like Franti, who in *Cuore* is defined a "villain" for smiling when the teacher narrates the funerals of king Umberto. Like in every miracle, a good deal of faith is necessary on the part of the observers. You have to believe it. But once you do, then any transvaluation is truly possible. It'd like to demonstrate this with an anecdote. A few years ago an important foundation of Great Conceptual Art asked me to organise a cycle of conferences in conjunction with the exhibition of an artist who proposed, I was told, a profound reflection on violence. When I requested to know what the meditation was about they explained to me that the artist had gone to a slaughterhouse in Mexico and had killed, with a hammer, a dozen horses there. The reflection on violence consisted of the recordings of the massacre. I pointed out that I couldn't see the meditative side, given that (if words have any meaning at all) it was not a reflection but an action, a cruel and extremely violent one, a kind of snuff movie against animals. I was then told that those animals were going to be slaughtered anyway.

So if the artist had gone to the showers in Auschwitz hammering to death the wretched people who entered (and who were going to die anyway) maybe some critics or curators would have said that the artist's was a profound reflection on violence. The entire conversation took place, as it had to (we shall get back to this point, which might seem lateral or environmental but it's cru-

cial in its being lateral or environmental), in a white room, minimal and very elegant like an Apple Store, and the people talking to me were all educated, well-mannered and kind men and (mostly) women. I was the ill-mannered one, unwilling to understand. On my way back home, I wondered if the transvaluation of all values wasn't moving from aesthetics to ethics, because perhaps aesthetic atrophy, the habit of swallowing anything, has started to unleash a form of moral atrophy.

4. Intimidation and Indulgence

In the end the exhibition didn't take place, as it was prohibited by animal rights activists and by the superintendent. I wonder: if it had taken place, what would the artist have done? Would he have stood at the door of the gallery holding a hammer? Maybe, but even without armed artists welcoming them, visitors normally seem quite intimidated in art galleries: they often pay to see an exhibition, and yet they walk around with a shy and respectful attitude. One may wonder how much fear people have, and who exactly is threatening them. Also, one may wonder whether it is humanly possible to find *everything* beautiful: at a restaurant or in a shop that is never the case, as there are always things one does not like. In art, however, everything is taken to be beautiful, and this – for a further paradox – happens just at the time when Great Conceptual art imposes the canon of aesthetic indifference. And yet this paradox ceases to be when one realizes that the aes-

thetic indifference hides an auratic omnipotence.

One is tempted to reach a very simple conclusion: in this transfiguration (as in all transformations) not only is there circumvention but also a good deal of social intimidation. This intimidating factor relies on the solid bourgeois element that thinkers from Nietzsche to Bourdieu have called “distinction”.¹³ It is not distinguished not to appreciate the slaughter of horses. It is not distinguished to show hesitation in the face of a work that consists (I happened to see it) of a chainsaw put into a boat – I guess it was meant to refer to the transience of all human affairs, somehow like a *Stilleben* created by Leroy Merlin. The chainsaw in the dinghy was the repetitive and almost paroxysmal version of the readymade, almost a hundred years later. Now, I know that this observation is far from original, but the readymade truly seems to be a gimmick that changes with time, with iteration and by imitation, in an intellectual swindle with motivations of economic interest. At its heart there is a powerful intuition. At a time when the nutcases of the Vittoriano are looking for beauty in vain and are committed to cover anything up with an aesthetic patina, the readymade proposes a radical gesture and says that the search is useless: anything can be a work of art.

The first movement, then, is desecration. The artwork has nothing special about it, it can be anything: at least nominally, it can be

a thing without aura or nor art. In reality, though, it isn't true that anything can be a work of art, because it would be difficult to turn a natural event such as a hurricane into a work of art. The same goes for an ideal object such as an equilateral triangle (at most, there would be a concrete object, the design of the equilateral triangle, and that, not the triangle itself, would be the artwork).¹⁴ Rather, what Duchamp suggests is something very reasonable that I personally fully agree with: *the artwork is first and foremost a thing*, with certain dimensions, features etc. Indeed, it is from time immemorial that museums (and the royal galleries that preceded them) have included all sorts of things that were not intended for aesthetic contemplation: weapons, buckles, tombstones, and of course human bodies (such as in Egyptian museums, which show how body art has an ancient soul).

The real desecration, therefore, lies not so much in the idea that anything can be a work of art, but rather in saying that, whatever it is, the work of art can afford to be ugly, i.e. not to aspire to beauty, to the status of what Duchamp called “retinal art”.¹⁵ Besides, this does not apply to other things of supposed aesthetic value, such as design objects. Therefore, Duchamp's real stroke of genius, much more than the readymade, was the practical elaboration of the thesis of aesthetic indifference as auratic omnipotence. This thesis proves to be valuable and salvific in an

¹³ Bourdieu 1987.

¹⁴ I have developed this point in Ferraris 2007.

¹⁵ Cabanne 1967.

age of aesthetic confusion, in which the eclecticism of many traditions generates the situation described by Gadda in *Acquainted with Grief*: the villas in Brianza “had something of the pagoda and something of the spinning mill, and they were also a compromise between the Alhambra and the Kremlin”.¹⁶ In this grab-bag of styles, classes, tastes and cultures, no one could be sure of one’s own taste, and everyone had reasonable grounds to think one was wrong: the estimators of Impressionism felt insecure because now that taste had been overcome by Cubism, the lovers of Art Pompier felt the same because it was considered “poor in spirit” by the enthusiasts of Impressionism and Cubism, and so forth. On the one hand, therefore, there is the path that leads from the Vittoriale to the Vittoriano: that is, the inclusive and syncretic path which collects all kinds of horrors in a museum. On the other hand, there is Duchamp’s break with the past: what matters is not the beauty, but the concept of a work. Once this is clear, with a radical Copernican revolution, one can stop worrying.

However, this apparent desecration fully capitalizes on the sacred value of art, and here lies the crux of intimidation. Just as the moustache drawn on the Mona Lisa derive their prestige through transgression and lese majeste, so the readymade presupposes a consecration that is inseparable from its desecration. Duchamp, in showing its objects, exploited the canonical value of art: a

whole heritage of respectability and auraticity. Bow down to this ugliness, to the dishonour of Golgotha (recall that for Hegel romanticism found its fundamental paradigm in the scandal of Christ on the cross),¹⁷ because through this genuflection you shall burn incense to the god unknown. Once put on a pedestal, the thing becomes an artwork, and the devotee will contemplate urinals and bottle racks with the same tension and aesthetically concentrated attitude dedicated to romantic art. In fact, people at exhibitions behave exactly as in church, or at Bayreuth: they are often silent or whispering, and would never dare to act as was common in the eighteenth century, an age in which the theatre lights were on and people ate while watching the show. Even the Chardonnay and cheddar that they give you at inaugurations somehow have the function of the Eucharist rather than that of “party food” – as this would reduce the works to a mere ornament and accompaniment.

Surprisingly, then, while the artist desecrates (at least in appearance), the user consecrates and feels bestowed with a decisive task: making art valuable, auraticizing it with her faith – just like a meteorite in the desert can be transformed by the faithful into the symbol of God. The two experiences – the rite in the gallery and the one in the desert – have a common element: the mystery. It is not clear what is expected from the artwork, but it’s a kind of redemption. This is a striking confirmation of the fact that if technical

¹⁶ Gadda 1969.

¹⁷ Hegel 1975.

reproducibility produced a loss of the aura of uniqueness, the aura was promptly (and much more abundantly) reconstructed by the faith of the users. The outward manifestation of devotion is often inadequate, and therefore people's saying "beautiful, beautiful" is an invocation rather than an appreciation. Theirs is a strategy of the sublime, which not coincidentally was extensively rehabilitated in the critical discourse on the avant-garde. Beauty becomes conspicuous by its absence where there's nothing beautiful and one is deliberately seeking the common and the ugly. But this lack, this mismatch between the concept and the object (this is essentially the sublime, especially the mathematical one, as Kant theorizes it in the *Critique of Judgment*)¹⁸ gives the impression to go far beyond the beautiful, because what matters are the intentions and thoughts, not the sensible appearance – as suggested, with terrifying machismo, again by Kant, when he said that a woman can be beautiful, but only man is sublime.¹⁹

Like all forms of asceticism, intimidation involves more than an indulgence: it implies spaces in which pleasure is returned and devotion is rewarded. It is no coincidence that the era of Great Conceptual Art, as that of the romantic spirit, is the only one in the history of taste that has come up with compensatory sub-categories: Kitsch, Camp, Pop (Pop was assumed by Great Conceptual Art with a stratagem, on which we will return

later). The situation is that of the Vittoriano and the Vittoriale: taste is no longer sure of itself, or cannot confess its predilections. If one wants to listen to Madonna, much preferring her to Stockhausen, or if one likes Campbell's soup cans and understands nothing of Picasso, and above all if one is bored to death watching Duchamp's urinal for the millionth time, there is a way out: one can claim that one likes Kitsch, Camp, and Pop – and will make a great impression too. This suggests that the common element in the compensatory triad Kitsch-Camp-Pop is the fear of being judged and (even more) of judging, due to an uncertainty of taste.

For a full "acceptance" of the phenomenon, one has to wait for its outcome and natural development: postmodernism, which follows from it in an explicit form, as one can read, for example, in a meaningful conversation between Charles Jencks and Susan Sontag.²⁰ Jencks' idea is that people ruin their lives for the sake of principles and that it is better to be nihilists – that is, among other things, not to care about those who judge us Kitsch or Camp or Pop. The genealogy of postmodern taste is the following. It begins with Camp (first English and then global), it continues with Kitsch and Pop, and culminates with postmodernism and weak thought, which returns Camp, Kitsch and Pop aficionados (that is, the greater part of humanity) some kind of good conscience: a kind of absolution or indulgence. "Don't worry, yours is not bad taste" Or rather,

¹⁸ Kant 1961.

¹⁹ Kant I. 1951: ch. III.

²⁰ The conversation appears in Cleto 2008 (ed).

even bad taste has a space and a social dignity: there are essays, handbooks, conferences and conventions about it.

Like all indulgences, of course, it leaves some doubts: does this forgiveness extend to Dolce and Gabbana and Lady Gaga? But the core of the matter is clear. The Romantics wanted a synthesis between philosophy and art, they pursued a new mythology. Two outcomes were produced by this dream: ascetic art, which took its first steps in Beethoven's late style, and Kitsch, which originally designated the taste of the new bourgeoisie of Monaco, who could not suffer Beethoven's quartets but much enjoyed Loden capes. With time and industry, with capitalism and imperialism, the phenomenon was universalized, reaching stronger cultural circuits and more important industrial circuits. This is how Friedrich Hölderlin's solitary Kitsch (leading to the saying that that man dwells poetically) was replaced by a Swinging London Brian Jones, Gina Lollobrigida, Victor Mature, Flash Gordon and the double-breasted Gianni Agnelli.

In this context Nietzsche's words would fit perfectly: "I am all the names in history," as he wrote to Burckhardt.²¹ Or, as Alberto Arbasino wrote in *Super Eliogabalo* [Super Heliogabalus], "Nietzsche, Adorno, Lacan, Toto'." All camp, no doubt. If this is the case, the campest of all is Martin Heidegger, in his Tyrolean jacket and a nightcap on his head (this was very well grasped in *Old Masters* by Thomas Bernhard, who is also

camp),²² proclaiming that the work of art is no less than truth's setting-itself-to-work, illustrating his thesis with the temple of Paestum (originally the Nuremberg Zeppelin Field set up on the pattern of the altar of Pergamon to accommodate Hitler's speeches), the shoes painted by Van Gogh, and a poem by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer.²³

5. Matter Matters

So, this is the crime scene. What to do? First of all, against the totalitarianism of the concept, it is worth noting that there is no art without appeal to perception, namely something that is not thought; therefore, the artwork is not simply the reminder of the ideas of a guy who, for some reason, chose to be an artist rather than a philosopher. This is about learning from Hegel, not when he speaks of romanticism and the death of art, but where he says that "sense" is a wonderful word, because it has two opposite meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the senses – vision, hearing, touch, smell, taste – and everything that has to do with perception. On the other hand, it indicates the meaning, related to thought, as when we say "the sense of life." It is not surprising that aesthetics – the study of art – derives its name from sense perception (*aisthesis* in Greek).²⁴ Trying to prevent the solidarity between these two poles, not con-

²¹ Nietzsche 1885/1889, letter dated 6 January 1889.

²² Bernhard 1985.

²³ Heidegger 2002.

²⁴ I have developed this point in Ferraris 1997.

sidering that matter matters and thinking that art is the greater the more it deviates from perception: these were the first mistakes that led to the dead-end of Great Conceptual Art. And yet, it is by never breaking with the senses and with perception that one can keep the way open for beauty.

But there's more. As Jane Austen noted in her *Sense and Sensibility*, there is another duality similar to the "wonderful" duplicity of sense and the senses. The concept must always be accompanied by feeling, because those who reject feeling in art do so only because they confuse feeling with sentimentality. The idea is very simple. What do we look for when we look at artworks? Mainly feelings.²⁵ Otherwise, we would read a treatise instead. It is not truth that we look for in art: this is why art has always been linked to beauty. By the same token, one can understand why, as we have seen in the case of the horse-slaughterer, a certain degree of aesthetic atrophy can go hand in hand with moral atrophy.

Finally, there is a third element of Great Conceptual Art that we should take into account. It is the search for a style that is immediately recognizable, even through the wide variety of realizations, media, issues. They say the style is the man himself. But it is also the artwork, because what we expect from the works is something unique and individual, just like people.²⁶

²⁵ I have developed this point in Ferraris 2007.

²⁶ I have developed this notion in Ferraris 2009.

Ten, Eleven, Twelve Muses

After the recovery of perception, feeling and style, we can move further. Very often philosophers, when elaborating theories on art, only refer to visual art, as if it were paradigmatic. And yet, this is not the case. Contemporary visual art and its church-like museums leads to a form of consecration, rite and admiration governed by the theory of aesthetic indifference. But there is a great deal of artistic objects (think of videoclips, movies, comic books, songs) that occupy our lives much more intensely than visual art. Such objects follow completely different cults, trying to capture the user with the most profane things, without being able to afford the luxury of aesthetic indifference. Given that good will is not enough, it can often happen that these objects are ugly or nothing special, but the point is that the user can say, "I like that" or "I do not like that", while with visual art things are different. So the death of art prophesied by Hegel two centuries ago was perfectly realized. At least it was perfectly realized in visual art, or rather, in that part of visual art that understands itself as Great Conceptual Art. The other kinds of art are doing well, and new ones emerge (think of video clips, or graphic novels). It is not the first time that new forms of art replace old ones (for example, at some point epic poems disappeared and novels appeared) and the really interesting thing is wondering what will be next.

Returning to the issue of aura, we realize that perhaps things have gone very differently from what we expected. Almost a hun-

dred years ago, Benjamin had argued that technical reproducibility would lead to a loss of aura. He was referring to the fact that paintings were being replaced by photographs, and the single work was substituted by many identical copies. Fifty years ago Andy Warhol began to take pictures with the Polaroid signing the shots, because those photos without negative were unique pieces. But, of course, they were also anomalies, because the ordinary photo has a negative, so it is infinitely reproducible – even more so in the case of digital photos. I wonder what Benjamin (who died in 1940) and Warhol (who died in 1987) would have said if they had predicted that this reproducibility was going to grow enormously, thanks to the Internet. Concretely, if I type “Brillo Box” + “Warhol” I will get almost nine thousand hits on Google, and if I select the image search I will find almost three thousand reproductions of the *Brillo Box*, the box of steel wool exhibited by Warhol in 1964 and considered a pop icon. But if I do this research on my tablet I will have three thousand images available in another place, and the same happens if I do the same thing on my smartphone. As a result, on the same table, I will have virtually nine thousand images of the *Brillo Box* and twenty-seven websites that talk about it or reproduce it.

Now, the question is: has this infinite reproducibility led to the disappearance of art? Of course not. In a sense, there is too much of it. There are countless works of pop art, countless forms of art. The only thing that disappeared, or that has dropped drastically in the case of reproduced works of art, is the

price. But it is precisely to remedy this problem that the work of aura was devised, that is, the most spiteful and intractable creation of the last century, the most resolute to displease the taste, the most pretentious in declaring that beauty is not on top of its aspirations. I once happened to have a discussion with a museum director who told me “Of course, in order to fully understand these works one must be part of the art world.” I pointed out that it was not very different from saying that to understand certain works one must be Aryan. This is an aspect that normally, to my knowledge, is not talked about, but I think it is crucial. Why do we condemn the surplus in industrial production and blame the financial capital, while passively accepting the very same things when it comes to art?

Reconsidering the relationship between art and social reality does not mean (God forbid) defending some form of realism. Rather, it means realistically examining what can keep up with some puzzling phenomena, which affect not only the production of artworks, but the art world as a whole. How is it possible that an architect such as Alvaro Siza has been able to realize beautiful exhibition spaces at the Madre in Naples but did not put outlets and switches in them? And the worst is that this great dysfunctionality was motivated by aesthetic reasons, much like what happened with the infamous Starck juicer.

The ones I mentioned are the side effects of the rejection of beauty in art and the following genesis of the work of aura. The great “No” to beauty must be followed by

other agencies carrying out a supplying function – generating figures that were once unimaginable, like fashion victims, design maniacs, or compulsive exhibition visitors. Or strange couples like the one between hyper-architectural museums and the works contained in them. The museums are generally all different, except for the name, which is a variation of Moma. The works contained, however, are all the same, all equally transgressive, all equally decided not to seek beauty (because if they did, they would be relegated in a more modest space, for example, a design shop). Hence a paradox on which it might be worth pondering. Intimidated common sense agrees that anything can be a work of art (and not a work of aura, a thing to which some conventionally auratic value is usually attached). But at the same time design has taught us how difficult it is to produce good objects: it is not true that any object can be an object of design. As a result, if it is true that being a work of art is, for an object, something like a sanctification, while being a design object is, so to speak, a promotion of lesser rank, than it seems that in the twentieth century it was easier to be saints than blessed.

Now, the salt-cellar by Cellini is cumbersome, but it still can contain salt, if necessary, while the Starck juicer will never squeeze a decent juice. What happened between Cellini and Starck? After all, it is a good question. I think the answer is simpler than it appears. The middle class (not necessarily very educated, unlike the courtly and aristocratic patronage that had preceded it) saw the work of aura as an instrument of so-

cial advancement and enrichment. At this point, the industrial production of works of aura began, filling the galleries and museums that proliferated through the establishment of public expenditure in which officials bought with the people's money. And I'm not at all convinced that museum directors would ever take home many of the works of aura they expose, nor would they ever buy them if they had to pay out of their pockets. Mind you: there have always been bad artworks, the Louvre or the Alte Pinakothek are full of them, as anyone can see. Man is not perfect and, above all, perfection is rare. But what the twentieth century has managed to achieve is the ideological legitimacy of ugliness through the work of aura. I wonder what the archaeologists of the future will think, if and when they find the works of aura. Maybe they will not even notice, and consider as works of art those that are currently regarded as minor productions.

Future Archaeologists

In this regard I would like to suggest a reflection. In George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, a professor (Henry Higgins) is committed to transform a simple girl (Eliza Doolittle) into a woman of high society. The *topos* is turned upside down by Mauro Covacich in *L'arte contemporanea spiegata a mio marito* [Contemporary art explained to my husband],²⁷ where an educated wife or girlfriend takes a wealthy but unruly man out of the

²⁷ Covacich 2011.

abyss of ignorance and distrust of contemporary art, by explaining word by word (but without too much arrogance) the sense of provocation wished for by Duchamp (urinal in the gallery), Cattelan (Pope hit by meteorite) and Manzoni (poop in the box). Or why Marina Abramovic has spent her time stripping the flesh off some bones at the Venice Biennale. Or what is beautiful in Koons' Kitsch.

Covacich beautifully explains thirty artists starting from a paradigmatic work, and does so with clarity and without technical jargon, as a good professor of art history would (even though he is trained as a philosopher and is a professional writer). In Covacich's book, the husband is finally redeemed by the wife, and eventually understands. A happy ending, then. According to me, however, even if she wins almost all her battles, Eliza loses the war – and it's not her fault, but the object's. While the initiation takes place, Covacich notes over and over again that Pygmalion, as she explains the art, thinks about his technological gadgets, that really fascinate him. What if Pygmalion was right? In fact, many of the recent works that Eliza explains to him (from Viola Calle's, still in the pre-digital era, to Barney and Hockney's, which concludes the review) hint precisely to those objects he longingly thinks of while she drags him into museums. One is tempted to think that those objects, filling advertising and the web as well as Pygmalion as Eliza's lives, do not emerge by contrast, but by association. This brings an afterthought: why come here to watch videos and installations when all this is

available elsewhere, in the form of technologies and innovative objects of which the works displayed here are often the verbose echo? So, while listening to Eliza's explanations, Pygmalion could bring out another book: *Parole chiave della nuova estetica* [Keywords of the new aesthetics], edited by Richard Fennel and Daniel Guastini.²⁸ In this book there are 82 entries written by 38 authors, and at least fifty of them concern precisely the age of technology: the smartphone, the camera, the flash memory and so on, while a significant minority regards the senses, taste, and slow food: the profit, the pleasure, the practical side and the repressed of the work of aura.

Moral of the story: the work of aura does not prevent the peaceful or even aesthetic enjoyment of objects. The *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*²⁹ that Arthur Danto attaches to Duchamp and Warhol has a specific background in Dutch interior painting, particularly Vermeer's, who successfully engages in a "transfiguration of the everyday" (which becomes "acceptance of the everyday" in Edouard Vuillard). In fact, the Dutch have taught us long before Pop Art that there is always a potential artwork in the object. Nevertheless, this comparison reveals a deep affinity between the inhabitants of seventeenth century Amsterdam and those of twentieth century New Amsterdam: they share a deep bourgeois pride of possession of properties. Now, the affinity between

²⁸ Finocchi, Guastini 2011.

²⁹ Danto 1981.

furniture and museums, as well as between object and artwork, is greater than one may think. This is the teaching of Mario Praz's *An Illustrated history in Interior Design*³⁰: the representation of a chamber of the Prinz-Max-Palais in Dresden dates back to 1776, one of the first pieces of evidence of a genre that was extremely successful in the nineteenth century, that of "an interior portrayed by itself" without human figures. This is similar to the watercolour at the Malmaison, started in 1812 and completed twenty years later, representing a sitting room with a sofa and an abandoned cashmere shawl on it. From another watercolour made in 1807 it is inferred that the shawl belongs to Josephine, Napoleon's first wife, who had left that chair twenty years earlier. A slight shiver runs through these desert interiors – perhaps this is why in furniture catalogues the advertisers generally place happy people as well. In the room in which every living thing is absent, there lies the secret of being, of what was there before our birth and will still be there after our death.

In the end, there is a relationship between the object and the environment on which we should reflect more. Goethe once wrote that it is not necessary that the real should take form: it suffices for it to hover around.³¹ This principle is indecipherable as per the truth (what would an environmental truth be?) but it fits perfectly to the museum. Artists argue that beauty is not the priority of

artworks. Thus, beauty migrates elsewhere, hovering in the environment, with a transition from the *ergon* to the *parergon*, from the work of aura to its frame (already less auratic). Then, from the frame, the aesthetic appeal may return to the fore, but not in the works of aura: it re-emerges in the museum shop, where you can find objects that participate in the ritual and allow you to make it fit in your life in the form of bags, ties, pencils and stationery.

The Nude Readymade

The work of aura has accustomed us (and I say "accustomed" to be polite, because as we have seen, there is also a bit of intimidation) to accepting the thesis that "anything can be a work of art" (while it is true that, rather, "anything can be a work of aura"): buy a coffee-maker, exhibit it in a gallery entitling it "Melancholy at dawn", and it will be a work of art. However (this, in my opinion, is the original experience underlying Nespolo's works), if you take the same corkscrew and put it in a design shop, saying it is a work of design, the users will not agree to consider it as such, unless it actually works. Is it not strange? There seems to be a singular antithesis between the design object and the ready-made.

In the case of ready-made, in fact, the idea is that anything taken from a standardized production environment can be a work of art if it receives the blessing of the art world. In the case of design there is rather a search with the purpose of producing a good object, for which (unlike in the case of art)

³⁰ Praz 1964.

³¹ Quoted in Heidegger 1969.

the consent of the critics and a gallery is not enough. You have to deal with the needs of functionality, technical reproducibility, industrial feasibility and so forth. Design, unlike Great Conceptual Art, cannot afford the romanticism, the surplus of meaning and aesthetic indifference. No, it must retain some classical balance between inside and outside, as well as between form and function. This highlights the unsaid of ready-made, its dark side and its truth. As suggested by the example of the museum, there is a relationship between the object and the environment. The urinal out of a museum, for example in a landfill, would not generate any kind of conflict – which shows that Duchamp was not fully sincere when he declared his indifference of “retinal art.” On the contrary, he was very sensitive to this fact, but kept it to himself.

Now let's come to the unique transfiguration of the ready-made known as *Brillo Box*. It would be wrong to think that such a thing as a *Brillo Box* resumes Duchamp's urinal. Strictly speaking, the former has nothing in common with the latter. First of all, it is not a ready-made: it was manufactured, with no practical purpose, especially for an exhibition, and inside there is no steel wool, because the box is much larger than the original, and if it contained steel wool would it weigh a ton. Just like the *Pietà* by Michelangelo (and unlike Duchamp's urinal or bottle rack) the *Brillo Box* was manufactured *to be an artwork*. Far from being found and exhibited with a nihilistic gesture, it is literally (given its increased size) the magnification of aspects of our lives, the life of

mass society and advertising (with the soups, the divas, the powerful television) that is to say, “look at how beautiful your world is, look at that glow, look at the beautiful women, look at the powerful men.” Warhol gives his works a strong aesthetic dimension: he literally magnifies (i.e. makes bigger and more obvious) Campbell's soups, Brillo Boxes and, of course, Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor. He does so for a simple and decisive reason, namely, that they are beautiful – which, again, can not be said of the urinal, or the bottle rack, nor of Duchamp's *mariée*. One might almost think that is the only similarity between Duchamp and Warhol consisted in having worked in New York.

Brillo Box metaphorically refers to the ready-made only because it reproduces things that belong to the world of consumer items. So, it makes aesthetically pleasing what was just bad or insignificant in the real ready-made, that is, in Great Conceptual Art. More than a transfiguration of the commonplace promoted to art, *Brillo Box* appears as a secularization of the ready-made, which limits the harsh and ugly provocations of Great Conceptual Art to the welcoming land of Pop. This process has the same dynamics and the same motivations as the relationship between haute couture and prêt-à-porter: take a abstruse phenomenon, an intellectual game without any aesthetic appeal and re-propose it in an infinitely more attractive and sensual frame (sensual and attractive at least as the boxes). Very little remains of the original phenomenon: essentially nothing, because Warhol's are not

real ready-mades, no more than Lichtenstein's are real comics. However, their colourful and ornamental pleasantness is ennobled by a metaphorical call for the big game: the game of Great Conceptual Art.

Here is the secret that makes the work of aura tolerable. The public bears vexations (in the sense in which, with lucid humour, Eric Satie's titled his piano piece to be performed eight-hundred times in a row *Vexations*) because beauty has taken refuge elsewhere, away from the intimidation of Great Conceptual Art and the indulgence of Kitsch-Camp-Pop. It is in the elegant walls of the gallery, in the design of furniture, hotels and restaurants, and especially in the amount of wonderful items that are produced industrially: things like the Olivetti lettera 32, smartphones and tablets, Japanese cars and markers, Moleskine diaries, juke boxes and Mont Blanc pens. These things are beautiful, and of course they are: their beauty makes them likelier to be purchased. They have a culturally recognized aesthetic dignity, so that at the MOMA and elsewhere they are exposed in the Design section.

But wasn't this the best kept secret of ready-mades, namely the fact that the object has its own character, its own hidden beauty? In these objects, which are hastily called "minor art", there is now the basis for the major art, for something that can overcome the era of Great Conceptual Art. This beauty has always been there, waiting wherever these objects are: in attics, flea markets, or in those wonderful archives of objects that are hardware stores. There, between nails, pliers, hammers, keys, screws and

thousands of other objects classified in detail (how would you find them otherwise?) there is an inventory of worlds and therefore of possible stories, from which to draw hundreds of novels (such as the couple buying hammer and nails to hang paintings in the new house, where he or she returns a few years later to get the locks changed) and especially of potential shapes whose aesthetic resources are under the eyes of all, and in a much less intimidating way than the works of aura.

Let me make an easy prediction. It is hard to think that many of the works of the twentieth century will remain, the priority of which was not beauty. Maybe a few will be saved for documentary and ethnographic reasons, or as a somehow sadistic curiosity, just as there are museums of torture or of the Inquisition. But objects will certainly remain. Designer ones, probably. But most certainly, more profoundly, objects *tout court*: they are the ones that remain by definition. Duchamp thought he showed that anything can be a work of art, but what he really showed is (thankfully) something completely different. On the one hand, as we have seen so far, he expressed a tautological argument: anything can be a work of aura, it suffices that we come to an agreement as with the emperor's new clothes. On the other hand, however, he brought attention to a condition that was far from obvious and yet is crucial, as well as antithetical to the hyper-conceptualism of the work of aura: namely the fact that the work of art is above all a *thing*.

Many artists have followed Duchamp on the first path, that is, on the track of the work of aura, in a pursuit of gimmicks and wonders increasingly less surprising and more repetitive, in which the basic rule is the idea – worthy of the worst bureaucrat – that a certificate is enough for a toothache to become a masterpiece. Far fewer have followed him (or rather, contradicted and perfected him) on the second path, that is, on the thesis that the artwork is first of all a thing. But it is not too important, because in this struggle of concepts the big winner is always the object, with the Egyptian charm of its survival.

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